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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is calling on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to instruct U.S. representatives to ask tough and incisive questions of key countries in the United Nations upcoming in-depth examination of 14 countries' human rights compliance known as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) being held February 2-13 in Geneva.

The UPR process offers a unique opportunity for U.S. representatives to ask hard questions about severe violators of religious freedom and related human rights. Among those to be examined in the coming week are Saudi Arabia, China, Cuba, Russia, Nigeria and Bangladesh. According to USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer, "All of these countries have been the subject of special concern and scrutiny by our Commission and several have been designated as 'countries of particular concern' under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act."

Calling the records of these countries “profoundly troubling,” Gaer said that “it is imperative that the U.S. joins the dozens of other countries which will speak up, and thus demonstrate America is serious about promoting freedom in our foreign policy.”

The serious religious freedom problems of the countries that will be reviewed in the upcoming UPR process have been documented in the USCIRF annual report and the State Department's annual religious freedom report. According to the United Nations, the UPR “consists of the review of the human rights practices all States in the world, once every four years.”

China and Saudi Arabia currently are designated, consistent with USCIRF recommendations, as “countries of particular concern” for severe religious freedom violations under the International Religious Freedom Act. For that reason, comments about their human rights records and suggested issues U.S. representatives could raise about violations of freedom of religion are attached in the following information sheets.

For detailed information about conditions in these countries, please visit the USCIRF Web site, www.uscifr.gov.

Critical Issues to be Raised at the UPR Meeting in Geneva

Regarding Saudi Arabia and China

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, designated by the U.S. State Department as a “country of particular concern” (CPC) in 2004, vigorously enforces its ban on all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and presentation of Sunni Islam, a policy that violates the rights of the large communities of non-Muslims and non-conforming Muslims who reside in Saudi Arabia. This particularly affects Shi'a Muslims, who compose up to 15 percent of the citizen population.

Among Commission concerns that merit frank discussion at the UPR meeting on Saudi Arabia are the following:

- Ending the criminalization of so-called apostasy, blasphemy, and criticism of the nature of the regime, which currently are used by the Saudi government to suppress discussion and debate and silence dissidents. Freeing prisoners of minority Muslim faiths, particularly Ismailis. One Ismaili, Hadi Al-Mutaif, is serving a life sentence after initially being condemned to death for apostasy in 1994 for a remark he made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous.
- Limiting the authority of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV), also known as the religious police, which exercises largely unchecked power to curtail rights. Saudi Arabia should ensure that its courts offer due process protecting the individual or effective remedies for violations of those rights associated with due process.
- Ending the harassment, arrest, imprisonment, torture, and deportation of persons who worship privately. Such persons generally are forced to go to great lengths to conceal private religious activity from the CPVPV, although the number of such incidents has decreased in recent years.
- Ending the practice of including offensive and discriminatory language, particularly toward Jews, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims, in official textbooks and the state school curriculum as well as in sermons in mosques. Although the Saudi government has undertaken some efforts at removing objectionable material, they have not been sufficient to halt the dissemination globally of intolerant literature and extremist ideology emanating from Saudi Arabia itself.

China

China, designated by the State Department as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in 1999, continues to deny its citizens the ability to exercise their religion freely. Religious practice remains tightly controlled and many adherents are harassed, detained, imprisoned, or mistreated because of their religious activities or spiritual practices. The government of China continues to hinder the ability of religious groups to engage with co-religionists overseas, citing official sensitivity to “foreign infiltration.” Repression of many religious groups intensified before the 2008 Beijing Olympics and has continued.

Among Commission concerns that merit frank discussion at the UPR meeting regarding China are the following:

- Abolishing the current legal statutes that require religious groups (and their places of worship) to get official approval from the government and join one of the five state-approved religious organizations.
- Ending the detention, arrest, and mistreatment in detention of “unregistered” Protestant religious adherents; as many as 693 individuals were detained in 2008.
- Ending the harassment and detention of “unregistered” Catholic bishops and priests, including an estimated 40 Catholic clergy who are detained, missing, or under strict surveillance. These include Bishop Su Zhimin who was detained in 1997 and remains missing and the Bishop of Zhengding, Jia Zhiguo.
- Guaranteeing fully in law the rights of children to practice religion and receive religious instruction and rescinding provincial laws, regulations, or local rules penalizing acts such as “instigating” religious belief in minors or engaging in private religious education.
- Abolishing all laws and regulations used to restrict Tibetan Buddhist religious activity , including accounting for all persons taken into custody, killed or otherwise harmed during protests in 2008 or recently in 2009; requiring government approval over the selection of all lamas; making illegal public devotion to the Dalai Lama including the display and veneration of his picture; unconditionally releasing all detained monks and nuns; and permitting a visit by independent and impartial experts to Geoden Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's chosen Panchen Lama.

- Ending the systematic repression of Uyghur Muslim religious activity, including longstanding campaigns to curb "illegal" scripture reading, expand political indoctrination of clergy, restrict observation of Ramadan and participation in the Haj pilgrimage, deny minors the right to practice religion. Further, the routine linkage of Islam to "extremism" and terrorism reportedly has lead to the arrest of peaceful Muslim religious leaders and adherents.

- Stopping the demolition of unregistered Buddhist and Daoist temples and lifting orders requiring Daoist personnel to support the leadership of the Communist Party and refrain from engaging in "cult" activities or those deemed to be "feudal superstitions."

Abolishing the legal framework outlawing so-called "cult" activity, which are used to arrest and harass Protestants, folk religionists, and Falun Gong practitioners, many who have been tortured and mistreated in prison according to the findings of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture.